


Historical Trends in Concerns About Social Issues Across Four Decades Among U.S. Adolescents

Benjamin Oosterhoff
Montana State University

Laura Wray-Lake 
University of California

Cara A. Palmer
Montana State University

Julie B. Kaplow
Baylor College of Medicine

This study examined adolescents' concerns about social issues and how these concerns have changed over historical time. Separate cohorts of U.S. high school seniors ($N = 110,953$; 51.1% female) reported their worries about four social issues (crime/violence, economic problems, hunger/poverty, race relations) every year from 1976 to 2015. Youth were most concerned with crime/violence, followed by economic problems, hunger/poverty, and race relations. Adolescents' social concerns varied by demographic characteristics and cohort, paralleling specific historical events and appearing responsive to the political challenges of the time. Initiatives seeking to engage youth within the political process may benefit from providing opportunities for teens to participate in civic activities aimed to address these issues.

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by substantial social-cognitive growth and the formation of a nuanced understanding of social and political systems (Flanagan, 2013). During adolescence, youth become more aware of the issues and challenges that face their local community and nation, which has implications for civic engagement and public policy. Awareness and concern for social issues are central facets of civic engagement, broadly defined as behaviors, knowledge, skills, and motivations that comprise political and prosocial contributions to society (Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Youths' developing understanding about social issues is thought to have lasting effects on their civic attitudes, values, and behaviors throughout adulthood (Metzger & Smetana, 2010). Additionally, politicians, the media, and scholars have held longstanding interest in concerns about social issues as a means of tracking the public's openness to policy change and society's readiness for social movements (Wray-Lake, Flanagan, & Osgood, 2010), although high school seniors are not frequent targets of national polls.

Despite the importance of youths' concerns about social issues, little research has examined the types of problems that are relevant and important

to youth or factors that may be associated with these concerns. Developmental theorists have stressed the need to embed youths' social understanding within their socio-historical context (Overton, 2013), as the specific challenges faced by youth and their communities may be especially sensitive to current socio-political events. Examining the types of issues that concern youth and whether these concerns vary across demographic characteristics and historical time will inform theory on civic engagement and social policy by elucidating the social problems youth are motivated to address and by highlighting the importance of historical context within developmental models of youth civic engagement (Dalton, 2008). Such insight can be used to create more efficacious community programs seeking to engage youth in the political process. Using nationally representative data from over 110,000 U.S. youth collected over 40 years, this study examined adolescents' concerns with a variety of social problems and whether these concerns varied by demographic characteristics and historical time.

The Development of Youths' Social Concerns

Adolescence is an active time for civic engagement, during which youth are reflecting on their role within broader society and forming beliefs about

Requests for reprints should be sent to Benjamin Oosterhoff, Department of Psychology, Montana State University, PO Box 173440, Bozeman, MT 59717-3440. E-mail: Benjamin.oosterhoff@montana.edu

which social problems are personally relevant and meaningful (Yates & Youniss, 1998). Prior research has shown that adolescents have a complex and nuanced understanding of a variety of social issues, reflected in their beliefs about the causes and consequences of poverty (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Mistry, Brown, Chow, & Collins, 2012), their awareness of racial inequality (Flanagan, Syvertsen, Gill, Galloway, & Cumsille, 2009), and their concern for the regulation of crime (Flanagan, 2013; Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017). Research also indicates that youth form a more nuanced and complex understanding of these issues with age (Flanagan et al., 2014). Age differences in youths' understanding of social issues are consistent with age-related advances in youths' social cognitive development, including increased abilities to reason about social issues, manage abstract concepts, and approach social problems from different perspectives (Flanagan et al., 2014; Smetana, 2006). Social-cognitive and ecological theories also highlight that these beliefs are connected with youths' personal experiences within their families and communities and may be influenced by macro-level systems including the current social, political, and historical period (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Oosterhoff, Kaplow, Layne, & Pynoos, 2018; Wray-Lake et al., 2010).

Civic engagement entails building knowledge about how social and political systems operate, but also includes forming beliefs about which types of issues are personally meaningful, important, and concerning (Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003; Youniss & Yates, 1999). Civic theorists have proposed that youths' social concerns may provide the "raw materials for [civic] action" (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002, p. 194), and are a key motivator of youth activism (Boehnke & Wong, 2011). Empirically, concerns about social issues have been directly tied to greater civic participation among adults (Stern & Dietz, 1994) and adolescents (Boehnke & Wong, 2011; Metz et al., 2003). Theories on youth empowerment have also highlighted the importance of understanding youths' social concerns and propose that youth gain more developmental benefits from civic engagement when they view their actions as relevant, meaningful, and worthwhile (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). Thus, understanding adolescents' social concerns has implications for promoting involvement in civic activities and enhancing the benefits received from civic participation. However, we know little about what social issues matter most

to youth and whether particular social issues are more salient for certain demographic subgroups and how this may correspond with historical sociopolitical events.

Demographic Differences in Youths' Concerns about Social Issues

Certain types of social problems may be more relevant for the lives of some youth than others and further amplified for those who are more likely to experience oppression (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). Critical consciousness theory describes how young people, particularly those from marginalized groups, recognize and analyze structural injustice (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Age-related changes in youths' social-cognitive development are thought to lead to greater recognition of structural inequality for all youth across adolescence (Flanagan et al., 2014), and likewise, youth are able to recognize structural causes of several different social issues, including racial biases, economic inequality, crime, and poverty (Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2017; Flanagan et al., 2014; Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017). Yet with age, increased autonomy, and heightened exposure to discrimination and oppression, youth from economically disadvantaged or historically oppressed backgrounds may have greater personal experiences with structural inequality and thus experience greater concerns about social issues that reflect inequality. Adolescents make meaning of the world around them based on what it is to be someone like them at that given point in historical time; thus, youths' concerns about social issues are developed and prioritized according to their gender, race, socioeconomic status, and community experiences (Hope & Spencer, 2017). Guided by civic development and critical consciousness perspectives, this study focused on adolescents' concerns about crime and violence, race relations, hunger and poverty, and economic problems. Documenting youths' concerns about these issues can elucidate youths' growing awareness of social and economic inequality. A critical consciousness lens also suggests the importance of examining demographic variation in youths' social concerns to better understand how personal experiences and contexts may shape youths' developing worldviews.

Although little is known about demographic differences in youths' concerns about social issues, exposure to different social experiences consistently varies across socioeconomic background,

gender, race, and community context and thus youths' social concerns may follow similar patterns. For instance, adolescent girls tend to be more involved in helping the less fortunate than boys (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2016), which may provide girls with greater exposure to economic inequality. Furthermore, adolescent girls endorse greater threat of victimization compared to boys (Smith, Torstensson, & Johansson, 2001). Accordingly, adolescent girls may endorse greater concern with economic problems, hunger and poverty, and crime and violence relative to boys. There may also be race, socioeconomic, and community context differences in youths' concerns about social issues. Compared to White youth, adolescents who identify as Black tend to be more aware of race-related structural inequalities, which may be due to greater personal experience with prejudice and discrimination (Flanagan et al., 2009). Black youth are more likely to experience crime, violence, and poverty relative to White youth (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005) due to historical and contemporary oppression. Thus, Black youth may have greater concern with race relations and with issues that disproportionately affect people of their racial group such as crime, violence, hunger, poverty, and economic problems. Furthermore, youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those who live in urban communities may have greater exposure to economic problems, crime and violence, and hunger and poverty, relative to youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and those living in nonurban communities and thus endorse greater concern about these issues (Finkelhor et al., 2005).

Historical Trends in Youths' Social Concerns

It has been long understood that development is influenced by historical context (Elder, 1998; Spencer et al., 1997). For instance, Life Course theory highlights how historical forces shape dynamics of family, school, community, and economic opportunities and subsequently influence development from early life through adolescence and beyond (Elder, 1998). During adolescence, youth are actively interpreting and building knowledge about society that may be largely contingent on the specific issues, challenges, and priorities of their community or nation at that given point in history. Empirical evidence has indicated that major sociopolitical events in history such as elections, wars, economic downturns, and social movements that are experienced in adolescence have lasting

effects on attitudes, memories, and behaviors in adulthood (Davis, 2004; McAdam, 1988; Schuman & Corning, 2011). Thus, adolescents' concerns about social issues are likely shaped by their historical context.

Research examining historical shifts in attitudes about social problems has generally focused on adult samples (Inglehart, 2015) and has highlighted several historical events that may have altered concerns about different social issues. For example, since 1935, Gallup has surveyed a random sample of American adults asking "What do you think is the most important problem facing America today?" at the beginning of each presidential election. Data from this ongoing study demonstrate marked variability in social concerns overtime, with heightened concern over inflation and energy during the late 1970s, fear of war becoming more prominent in the mid-1980s, concerns about drug use becoming greater in the 1990s, concerns about war re-emerging in the early 2000s, and worries related to unemployment surfacing in the late 2000s. Additionally, there were notable increases in adults' concerns about economic problems immediately following the great American recession of 2008.

Although adults' concerns about social issues have been documented, less research has examined historical trends in adolescents' concerns about social issues. Prior research has shown historical differences in youths' concerns about race relations, with both White and Black youths' concerns about race relations peaking during the mid-1990s shortly after the acquittal of Rodney King and the accompanying 1992 Los Angeles Riots (Tuch, Sigelman, & MacDonald, 1999). Gallup polls of teens during Obama's presidency in 2011 and 2013 suggest that race relations were less of a concern compared to previous eras, with 39% of youth reporting that they worry about race relations a fair amount or great deal and 23% of youth saying that race relations have gotten worse since Obama's election (Marcovitz, 2013). Although less studied, other specific historical events may have increased youths' concerns about social issues. For instance, the mid-1990s was characterized by an increase in crime rates known as the "crime bubble," which may have heightened youths' concerns about crime and violence.

Overall, few studies have examined historical shifts in youths' social concerns. National polls tend to gauge youths' opinions on specific issues at certain times or survey youth about behaviors to understand trends in sex, drugs, obesity, and

school dropout, yet such studies rarely systematically assess youths' concerns about multiple social issues over a substantial period of time. Monitoring the Future (MTF) is a unique, nationally representative data source for tracking a range of attitudes and behaviors among high school seniors, including their concerns about social issues, and has been conducted annually since the 1970s. Documenting historical shifts in adolescents' concerns about social issues may contribute to theory on civic engagement by demonstrating whether and how adolescents respond to the changing social challenges that face their communities and the nation. Such information may help identify sociohistorical events that motivate youth civic action. Furthermore, notable increases in youths' social concerns among a nationally representative sample could signal conditions conducive to certain social movements (Ryder, 1985) and forecast issues likely to become relevant for public policy in the future as adolescents become more integrated within the political system.

Current Study

Using data from over 110,000 youth collected from separate cohorts annually from 1976 to 2015, the purpose of this study was to examine adolescents' concerns about social issues over 40 years from 1976 to 2015. Consistent with critical consciousness theory, we selected issues that may be relevant for youth and have known structural causes for inequality, including crime and violence, race relations, hunger and poverty, and economic problems. Based on research demonstrating demographic differences in exposure to social disparities (Finkelhor et al., 2005), it was expected that adolescent girls would be more concerned with economic problems, hunger and poverty, and crime and violence compared to adolescent boys, Black youth would endorse greater concern with race relations, crime and violence, hunger and poverty, and economic issues relative to non-Black youth, and youth with lower parental education and those from urban communities would endorse greater concern over crime and violence, hunger and poverty, and economic problems relative to youth with more highly educated parents and those from non-urban communities. Additionally, we generally expected that social concerns would parallel sociopolitical events relevant for the given historical period. Specifically, it was hypothesized that historical trends in concerns about race relations and crime and violence would demonstrate a

quadratic effect across time and peak during the mid-1990s. Concern for social issues were also expected to rise for certain subgroups of youth when sociopolitical moments pertain to issues that affect them more directly. Thus, we explored whether historical trends in youths' social concerns varied by demographic characteristics.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were U.S. 12th graders enrolled in the MTF study between 1976 and 2015. Beginning in 1975, the MTF study has continually recruited independent, nationally representative samples of approximately 16,000 12th graders from about 135 high schools during the spring of each year to examine trends in substance use (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2012). In general, the same schools are resampled each year. If schools declined to participate in subsequent years, they are replaced with schools with similar demographic characteristics from the same region. Within each school, up to 350 students were included. In schools with fewer students, the usual procedure was to include all students in the data collection. In larger schools, a subset of students are selected by randomly sampling entire classrooms. This study used 40 waves of publically available data from 1976 to 2015. Participants in the MTF study each received one of six randomly distributed self-report surveys. This study included youth who received Form 5 (approximately 2,500 participants per wave), which included questions regarding concerns about social issues. Due to the random distribution of survey forms across schools and students, this subsample of youth from MTF study is nationally representative of U.S. high school seniors.

The final analytic sample consisted of 110,953 high school seniors. Participants were 51.1% female and 78.9% were 18 years or older. Participants provided detailed reports of their race and ethnicity at every measurement wave. However, to protect the anonymity of youth from racial and ethnic minority groups represented at low frequencies, the only consistent measure of race and ethnicity available across all waves in the public-use data indicates whether youth identified as White or Black. Youth reporting a different race or ethnicity were given missing values for race/ethnicity. Across the total sample, participants were 67.2% White, 11.5% Black, and 21.4% were missing, representing both

true missingness and identification of a racial/ethnic minority other than Black. A Hispanic/Latino (a) category was added to the public-use data from 2005 onward, but these data are not used in the current study because this category would introduce a confound between historical time and race/ethnicity. Regarding parent education, 13.6% of mothers (15.9% of fathers) did not complete high school, 31.9% of mothers (26.6% of fathers) completed high school but did not have any college training, 18.3% of mothers (15.5% of fathers) completed some college, 29.3% of mothers (32.1% of fathers) obtained a college degree or higher, and 6.8% of youth did not report or know their mothers' education (9.9% of youth for fathers). About half of youth (44.6%) reported residing in a rural community or small city with <50,000 people, and the remainder reported living in a mid-sized city or a suburb of medium-sized city (24.2%) with 50,000 to 100,000 people, or an urban city or suburb (32.4%) with 100,000 or more people. A total of 21.9% of youth reported living in the same household with only one parent.

Measures

Adolescents' concerns about social issues. Adolescents were presented with a question asking, "Of all the problems facing the nation today, how often do you worry about each of the following?" Separate items assessed youths' concerns with four different social and political problems: crime and violence, race relations, hunger and poverty, and economic problems. Responses were given on a 4-point scale which included 1 (*never*), 2 (*seldom*), 3 (*sometimes*), and 4 (*often*). Each item was treated as a separate social concern, with higher values indicating greater concern for that specific issue.

Demographic characteristics. Participants reported their age, gender, race, and parents' education. Public use data for age was recorded as 1 (under 18) and 2 (18 and over). Given that public use data only provided precise information regarding whether youth were White or Black, race was dummy coded, such that 1 indicated "Not Black" and 2 indicated "Black".¹ Highest level of mothers' and fathers' education were reported separately on a 6-point scale from 1 (*completed grade school or less*) to 6 (*graduate or professional school after college*),

and were averaged to create one indicator of parents' education. For youth from single-parent families, the highest level of education from the primary parent was used. Community type was dummy coded as either an urban or nonurban community.

Analytic Technique

Primary analyses were conducted in SPSS version 22 (IBM, Armonk, NY) and *Mplus* version 7 (Muthen & Muthen, Los Angeles, CA). A repeated-measures ANOVA was used as a preliminary analysis to compare the frequency of youths' worries about each social issue. To examine historical trends in youths' social concerns and similar to prior research (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Wayne Osgood, & Briddell, 2011), we first plotted the mean level of adolescents' social concerns for each yearly measurement wave from 1976 to 2015 and described notable historical shifts. We also performed a series of curve analyses to formally examine linear and nonlinear historical trends in youths' social concerns across historical time by fitting linear, quadratic, and cubic curves for the effects of measurement wave on each concern. Given the large sample size and potential for Type 1 error, we selected the best-fitting model based on the largest R^2 change between the models and by observing the plotted means. After the best-fitting curve models were identified, we estimated a series of linear regressions to test demographic differences in historical trends for youth social concerns. Curve components from the best fitting model were entered as independent variables, followed by demographic characteristics (parents' education, gender, race, community context), and interactions between demographic characteristics and the curve components. Simple slopes were used to probe significant interactions and mean levels of concerns were plotted over historical time for separate subgroups. A False Discover Rate correction was applied to adjust for multiple testing (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995). Sampling weights were used to correct for unequal probabilities of selection that occurred at any stage of sampling.

Missing data. Multiple imputation ($N = 10$ datasets) was used to address low levels of missing data for most covariates (ranging from 1% to 6%). Due to the restrictions placed on public use data, information regarding race/ethnicity was unavailable for 21.4% of youth. Analyses with

¹We also analyzed our models with race characterized as 1 indicating "Not White" and 2 indicating "White" and found similar results.

and without imputed data were identical, and estimates from multiply imputed models are provided.²

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

A repeated-measures ANOVA was used to examine mean differences in social concerns. There was a significant multivariate effect, Wilks $\lambda = .65$, $F(3, 110,949) = 19,416.401$, $\eta_p^2 = .35$ and within-subjects effect for concern type, $F(3, 329,196) = 16,566.72$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$. All Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons were significant ($ps < .001$). On average, youth endorsed the greatest concern for crime and violence ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.80$), followed by economic problems ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.94$), hunger and poverty ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.92$), and race relations ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.04$).

Historical Trends in Youths' Social Concerns

A primary study aim was to examine historical trends in adolescents' social concerns from 1976 to 2015. Figure 1 displays mean levels of concern for these issues by measurement wave and Table 1 presents the model statistics and R^2 for linear, quadratic, and cubic curves for the effects of measurement wave on each social concern. Adolescents' concerns about crime and violence (Figure 1a) and race relations (Figure 1b) demonstrated similar historical patterns, characterized by relative stability during the late 1970s to mid-1980s, followed by elevated concern from the late 1980s to early 2000s, before lowering from the mid-2000s through 2015. In other words, there appeared to be an increase in adolescents' concerns about crime and violence and race relations during the late 1980s that continued into the late 1990s, followed by a decrease in the early 2000s. Curve analyses indicated that quadratic measurement wave effects resulted in the largest increase in R^2 for concerns about crime and violence and race relations, explaining 2% and 1% of variance respectively.

Concerns about hunger and poverty (Figure 1c) increased across the mid-1980s eventually peaking in the early 1990s, followed by a decrease and stabilization in the early 2000s. Curve analyses indicated that cubic measurement wave effects resulted in the largest R^2 change for concerns about hunger and poverty, explaining approximately 1% of the variance. Concerns about economic problems (Figure 1d) were elevated from 1980 to 1982 and again from 1990 to 1994. This was followed by an additional, more pronounced increase in concerns about economic problems that occurred in 2009, followed by slower decline into 2015. Curve analyses indicated that the quadratic measurement wave effect accounted for largest increase in R^2 . However, the cubic curve explained an additional 0.6% of the variance and accounted for the increase in concerns about economic problems that occurred in 2008 that was unaccounted for by the quadratic curve. Thus, the cubic curve was selected for historical trends in concerns about economic problems.

Demographic Differences in Historical Trends

Regression models were used to examine demographic differences in youths' social concerns across historical times. Specifically, we tested whether the effects of the curve components (linear, quadratic, cubic) for measurement wave on social concerns were moderated by parents' education, race, gender, and urban community context. Table 2 displays the results from these models and Figure 2 displays the mean levels of concern by subgroup across historical time.

Crime and violence. Consistent with our curve analyses, there was a significant linear effect of measurement wave for concerns about crime and violence. Additionally, youth who were female and were Black endorsed greater concerns about crime and violence relative to youth who were male and were not Black. Parents' education moderated the quadratic historical trends of crime and violence. Relative to youth with more highly educated parents, youth with less educated parents had a slightly higher quadratic peak (low parents' education: $\beta = -.06$, $p < .001$; high parents' education: $\beta = -.04$, $p < .001$) in concerns about crime and violence during the mid-1990s. We did not find evidence that gender, race, or urban community context moderated the effects of historical time on youths' concern about crime and violence,

²Data missing on race represented true missing data and identification as a racial group other than White or Black. Additional analyses were performed to examine whether findings differed by treating missing data on race as "non-Black". Findings were identical to those reported when using multiple imputation or list-wise deletion.

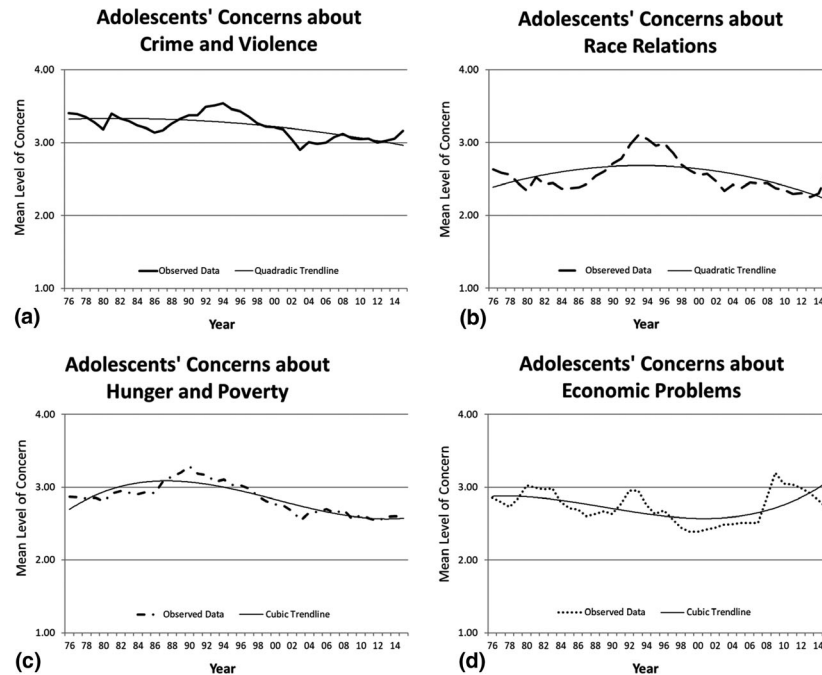


FIGURE 1 (a–d) Observed means in adolescents social concerns across historical time. Notes: Quadratic trendlines are displayed for crime and violence and race relations. Cubic trendlines are displayed for hunger and poverty and economic problems.

indicating that demographic differences in these concerns may be relatively stable (See Supporting Information for all simple slopes).

Race relations. We also found significant effects for both the linear and quadratic components of measurement wave for concerns about race relations, as well as significant demographic differences. Youth who had more educated parents, were Black, and were female endorsed greater concerns about race relations relative to youth who had less educated parents, were not Black, and were male. Additionally, race moderated the linear historical trends and parents' education moderated quadratic historical trends for concerns about race relations. Relative to non-Black youth, Black youth had an overall steeper linear decrease (non-Black: $\beta = -.01, p < .001$; Black: $\beta = -.11, p < .001$) in concerns about race relations and relative to youth with less educated parents, youth with more educated parents had a steeper quadratic peak in concerns about race relations over historical time (low parents' education: $\beta = -.10, p < .001$; high parents' education: $\beta = -.13, p < .001$). Race had a much larger effect than parent education on concerns about race relations, and despite differences by race in historical trends, Black youth remained

higher in concerns than non-Black youth across the study period.

Hunger and poverty. We found a significant cubic effect of measurement wave as well as significant demographic differences in the model predicting youths' concerns about hunger and poverty. Youth who had more educated parents, were Black, and were female endorsed greater concerns about hunger and poverty relative to youth who had less educated parents, were not Black, and were male. Additionally, we found a significant parents' education and gender by quadratic measurement wave interaction. The increases in concerns about hunger and poverty that occurred in the early 1990s were slightly stronger for youth with less educated parents ($\beta = -.07, p < .001$) relative to youth with more educated parents ($\beta = -.05, p < .001$) and for female youth ($\beta = -.07, p < .001$) relative to male youth ($\beta = -.03, p < .001$). There was a significant race by linear measurement wave interaction, with Black youth demonstrating a sharper linear decrease in concerns about hunger and poverty over time relative to non-Black youth (non-Black: $\beta = -.15, p < .001$; Black: $\beta = -.26, p < .001$). Even with the race and gender differences in historical trends, Black youth

TABLE 1
 Linear, Quadratic, and Cubic Curve Analysis for the Effects of Measurement Wave on Adolescents' Concerns about Social Issues

	Crime and Violence			Race Relations			Hunger and Poverty			Economic Problems		
	F	df	ΔR^2	F	df	ΔR^2	F	df	ΔR^2	F	df	ΔR^2
Linear	1,861.89	1, 110,953	.017	130.71	1, 110,953	.001	73.51	1, 110,953	.001	150.39	1, 110,953	.001
Quadratic	1,066.83	2, 110,952	.019	729.61	2, 110,952	.013	68.54	2, 110,952	.001	749.87	2, 110,952	.013
Cubic	726.595	3, 110,951	.019	493.20	3, 110,951	.013	194.41	3, 110,951	.005	671.55	3, 110,951	.018

Note. All F values were significant at $p < .001$.

and female youth expressed more concern for hunger and poverty than their counterparts across the four decades.

Economic problems. For the model predicting youths' concerns about economic problems, there were significant linear, quadratic, and cubic effects of measurement wave as well as significant demographic differences. Specifically, youth who had more educated parents and were Black endorsed greater concerns about economic problems relative to youth who had less educated parents and were not Black. Additionally, we found a significant gender by linear measurement wave interaction and a significant parent education and race by cubic measurement wave interaction. Specifically, adolescent males had a steeper linear decrease in concerns about economic problems relative to females (males: $\beta = -.24, p < .001$; female: $\beta = -.19, p < .001$). Additionally, youth with more educated parents' and non-Black youth had a steeper cubic increase in concerns about economic problems relative youth with less educated parents (low parents' education: $\beta = .16, p < .001$; high parents' education: $\beta = .20, p < .001$) and Black youth (non-Black: $\beta = .20, p < .001$; Black: $\beta = .12, p < .001$).³

DISCUSSION

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by substantial growth in social understanding and civic engagement. During adolescence, youth are forming personal beliefs about which types of social issues are meaningful, relevant, and concerning, and these beliefs are theorized to motivate civic action (Metz et al., 2003). Furthermore, contemporary theory on youth civic engagement indicates that social concerns may vary based on sociodemographic characteristics and historical time. The purpose of this study was to examine adolescents' concerns about social issues and test whether these concerns varied across demographic and historical context. Findings indicated that youth differentially prioritize social problems, with crime and violence having higher priority relative to other social issues. Furthermore, adolescents' concerns about specific social issues systematically varied across demographic characteristics and historical time, indicating that these concerns may be

³Exploratory analyses tested interactions between race and parents' education. After applying False Discovery Rate corrections, we did not find evidence of an interaction between race and parents' education in any of our models.

TABLE 2
Linear Regressions Testing Demographic Differences in Historical Trends for Youths Social Concerns

	Social Concern											
	Crime and Violence			Race Relations			Hunger and Poverty			Economic Problems		
	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE
Linear wave	-.16*	-.13	.01	.11*	.11	.02	-.01	-.01	.03	-.35*	-.33	.04
Quadratic wave	-.01	-.01	.01	-.10*	-.11	.02	.02	.02	.02	.13*	.13	.02
Cubic wave	-	-	-	-	-	-	.12*	.05	.02	.33*	.16	.02
Parents' education	.00	.00	.00	.10*	.11	.01	.04*	.04	.01	.06*	.06	.01
Black	.14*	.31	.01	.18*	.54	.02	.11*	.29	.01	.03*	.08	.01
Gender	.24*	.37	.01	.12*	.24	.01	.31*	.57	.01	.01	.02	.01
Urban	.00	.00	.01	.00	-.01	.01	-.01	-.01	.01	.00	-.01	.01
Linear wave \times Parents' education	-.01	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.01	.01	.01	.03	.02	.01
Quadratic wave \times Parents' education	-.03*	-.02	.00	-.05*	-.04	.00	-.03*	-.02	.00	-.01	-.01	.00
Cubic wave \times Parents' education	-	-	-	-	-	-	.00	.00	.00	-.04*	-.02	.00
Linear wave \times Black	.03	.02	.01	-.13*	-.11	.01	-.16*	-.12	.02	.01	.01	.02
Quadratic wave \times Black	-.02	-.02	.01	.02	.02	.01	.01	.00	.01	-.01	-.01	.01
Cubic wave \times Black	-	-	-	-	-	-	.04	.01	.01	-.09*	-.03	.01
Linear wave \times Gender	.01	.01	.01	-.01	-.01	.01	-.02	-.01	.02	.08*	.05	.02
Quadratic wave \times Gender	.00	.00	.01	-.02	-.02	.01	-.07*	-.05	.01	-.01	-.01	.01
Cubic wave \times Gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	.02	.01	.01	-.04	-.01	.01
Linear wave \times Urban	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.00	.00	.02	.03	.06	.02
Quadratic wave \times Urban	-.01	-.01	.01	.00	.00	.01	-.01	-.01	.01	.00	.00	.01
Cubic wave \times Urban	-	-	-	-	-	-	.01	.01	.01	-.02	-.02	.01
R ²	.01			.06			.11			.03		
F (df)	923.343 (11, 110,943)			589.07 (11, 110,943)			422.04 (15, 110,939)			171.18 (15, 110,939)		

Notes. Gender coded 1 = Male, 2 = Female.

* $p < .05$.

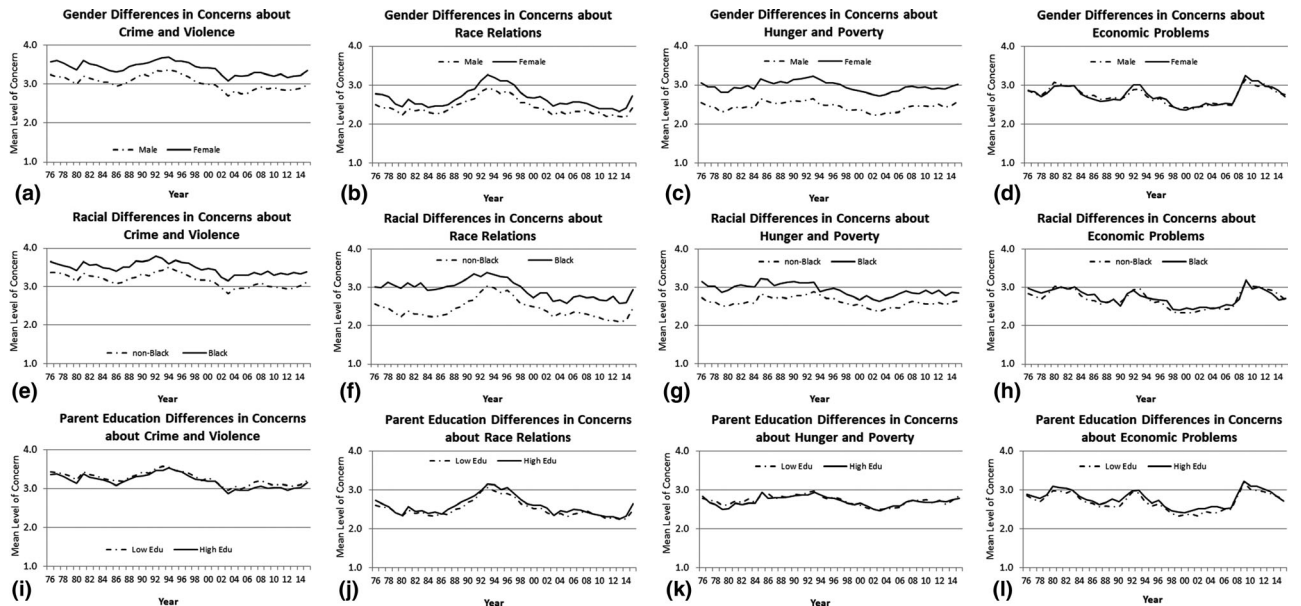


FIGURE 2 (a-l) Gender, race, and parent education differences in youths' social concerns.

Note: High parent education represents one standard deviation above the mean and low parent education represents one standard deviation below the mean.

responsive to specific problems faced by different subgroups of youth and to sociopolitical events at different points in history.

Adolescents endorsed varying levels of concern with crime and violence, race relations, hunger and poverty, and economic problems and these concerns largely differed based on issue. Youth were notably more concerned about crime and violence relative to other issues. These findings are consistent with research indicating that adolescents are about three times more likely to experience victimization within a given 6-month period relative to adults (Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999), and suggests that crime and violence may be a social problem that plays an especially meaningful role in the lives of youth. Heightened concerns about crime and violence relative to other social issues appeared consistent over the past 40 years and may be in contrast with adults' high-levels of concerns over economic problems found in prior research (Aisch & Parlapiano, 2017). This contrast may suggest developmental differences in the meaning and relevance individuals place on social issues depending on age and stage of life. Adults may be more likely to have careers and provide for their families and thus may prioritize attention to economic problems, whereas youth may have more exposure to crime and violence and heightened awareness of these issues.

Findings indicate that adolescents' social concerns follow notable historical trends that correspond with concurrent sociopolitical events. Specifically, quadratic peaks in youths' concerns about crime and violence and race relations that occurred in the early and mid-1990s are consistent with prior research (Levitt, 2004) and may reflect heightened crime and racial tensions of time. Indeed, crime rates reached a historical peak during the mid-1990s (Levitt, 2004), and prior research has shown that youths' attitudes about racial integration follow a similar pattern (Tuch et al., 1999). Concerns about hunger and poverty demonstrated similar historical trends, only the increase in these concerns began in the early to mid-1980s, eventually peaking in the mid-1990s. The early initial increase in concerns about hunger and poverty may have been the result of drastic scale-backs in welfare provisions by the Reagan administration that continued through the "Welfare to Work" reform of the Clinton administration (Dando, 2012). Consistent with research on adults, we also found notable historical shifts in concerns about economic problems, with small increases in these concerns occurring in 1980 and 1990, and a substantial

increase in concerns about economic problems in 2009. Notably, each increase corresponded to different U.S. economic recessions, with the largest occurring in 2008. Overall, historical findings indicate that youths' concerns about social issues are responsive to their sociohistorical contexts and follow patterns consistent with the social and economic problems of the time. Our results underscore that adolescents are paying attention to national and world events. Trends in adolescents' social issues are informative in light of evidence that youths' political views and behavior may be shaped in lasting ways by the concerns they develop in adolescence (Davis, 2004; Finlay, Wray-Lake, Warren, & Maggs, 2015; Schuman & Corning, 2011).

Adolescents' concerns about social issues varied by demographic characteristics in a manner suggesting that youths' social experiences may shape developing views of the world in systematic ways. For instance, compared to non-Black youth, Black youth endorsed greater concerns for race relations, crime and violence, hunger and poverty, and economic problems. Consistent with critical consciousness theory (Watts et al., 2011), these findings may reflect racial differences in experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination, crime, and poverty or more general heightened awareness of racial disparities in these problems (Flanagan et al., 2009; Like-Haislip & Miofsky, 2011). These findings held even when accounting for parental education, and suggest that Black youth may be more aware of issues that reflect discrimination, victimization, and marginalization in society. Adolescents' social concerns also demonstrated meaningful variation by gender. Adolescent girls reported greater concern with hunger and poverty, race relations, and crime and violence relative to boys. These findings may reflect gender differences in exposure to the consequences of poverty, violence, and racial disparities (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2016; Titus, Dennis, White, Scott, & Funk, 2003). Gender differences in these issues may also signal more general gender differences in empathy or perspective taking, with adolescent girls demonstrating greater empathic concern and perspective taking abilities relative to boys (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). Like empathetic concern, concerns about social issues may also be shaped by gendered socialization practices by parents, teachers, and others that tend to emphasize care and concern for others as well as heightened vigilance among daughters (Wray-Lake, Flanagan, & Maggs, 2012). We also found socioeconomic differences in youths' social concerns. Inconsistent

with hypotheses, youth with more educated parents were more concerned about race relations, hunger and poverty, and economic problems relative to youth with less educated parents. Although these effects were relatively small, it is possible that youth with more educated parents spend more time discussing sociopolitical events, thus leading to a heightened awareness of these issues (Oosterhoff, Metzger, & Babskie, 2015).

For some issues, demographic difference in youths' social concerns have changed over historical time, with notable variation by race and gender. For instance, although Black youth were more concerned about race relations overall, they demonstrated a steeper historical decrease in these concerns relative to non-Black youth up until 2015. This finding parallels historical trends in U.S. Black adolescents' perceptions of racial integration between the 1970s and mid-2000s (Tuch et al., 1999). Additionally, the overall historical linear decreases in concerns about hunger and poverty were greater for Black youth relative to non-Black youth, a pattern suggesting that Black and non-Black youth became more similar in their concerns about hunger and poverty in recent decade, although Black youth remained more concerned about hunger and poverty than non-Black youth across the study period. Additionally, the quadric peak in concerns about hunger and poverty that occurred in the mid-1990s was higher for adolescent girls relative to boys, suggesting that adolescent girls may have been more attuned than boys to heightened economic needs in the United States or globally in the 1990s. We also found historical variation in the effect of parents' education on youths' social concerns across time. However, it is worth noting that these effects were very small relative to race and gender differences (see Figure 2a–1) and may have emerged from the high variability in parental education.

We also found demographic differences in historical trends for economic concerns, although the observed mean differences were quite small. These findings suggest that for economic concerns, youth across demographic groups were more similar than different. In fact, demographic differences in level of youth concerns over time were more clearly evident than differences in historical trends for many study results, especially for gender and race. Thus, the gendered and racialized ways that youth experience their day-to-day lives may have fairly consistent effects on youths' developing social concerns across historical time. Perhaps gender and race-based discrimination and socialization, and

the ways they shape youths' social issue attitudes, have been entrenched in U.S. society over the past four decades. Alternatively, macro-level policies, events, and climates may affect youths' concerns about social issues in largely similar ways across demographic groups, with more subtle differences in historical trends evident by gender and race.

Limitations

Findings should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. Although data were collected over 40 years, data were correlational and casual inferences are cautioned. Future longitudinal research is needed to test intraindividual change in youths' social concerns in response to historical events. Additionally, due to available public data, analyses were limited to examining racial differences among Black and non-Black racial groups; future research would benefit from examining variation in social concerns by more diverse racial/ethnic groups. Addressing these issues may be particularly important given the increasing population of Hispanic youth within the United States. Similarly, family income and poverty level data were unavailable. Future research would benefit from exploring the intersection between poverty and youths' social concerns. Theoretical advances in youth activism have also highlighted the importance of considering the intersection of multiple social identities within the context of youths' critical consciousness and concepts of social problems (Gordon, 2009). Although it was beyond the scope of this study, future research should consider the complex interplay among youths' sociodemographic backgrounds, social experiences, and concerns about social issues. This study captured youths' concerns about a variety of social issues and it is unknown whether youth are activity engaged in addressing these issues. Future research may benefit from examining issue specificity in the degree of concern youth have regarding specific social problems and their engagement—and potential barriers to engagement—in addressing these issues.

Additionally, we did not find evidence that social concerns varied across community context, which may be due to this studies focus on examining variation by urban and nonurban status. Scholars have noted a large degree of heterogeneity within and across community types (Ferris, Oosterhoff, & Metzger, 2013) and it is possible that focusing specifically on urban and nonurban comparisons may have diluted meaningful variation in how social concerns differ for youth within

different communities. Future research should consider a more thorough examination of how community type may alter youths' concerns about social issues.

This study assessed social concerns by having youth rate the degree to which specific issues were concerning on a Likert-type scale. Although our focus on specific issues was rooted in developmental theory, asking discrete questions may have constricted the wide range of possible issues that concern youth. Future research should consider utilizing free-response questions to capture the full breadth of youths' social concerns. Additionally, prior research has directly linked social concerns with youth civic action (Metz et al., 2003). However, it is plausible that concerns for social issues do not always motivate civic action. Future research may benefit from examining how, when, and under what conditions social concerns are linked with civic action.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Despite these limitations, findings have important implications for theory and organizations seeking to promote youth civic engagement. Theory has highlighted the need to consider adolescents' understanding of different social issues as a key component of civic engagement and proposes that youths' sociopolitical understanding is embedded within ecological and historical contexts (Metzger & Smetana, 2010; Yates & Youniss, 1998). The current study builds on this research by demonstrating that adolescents endorse a range of social concerns, and these concerns may be contextually dependent, as indicated by variation due to demographic characteristics and, to an extent, historical time. Developmental theory and research also suggests that with age, adolescents' understanding of social issues coalesce with emerging and transforming concepts of the self and contributes to the formation of youths' civic identity (Yates & Youniss, 1998). This type of synthesis raises questions regarding how sociohistorical events may interact with normative developmental processes to alter youths' civic priorities and engagement across the transition to adulthood. Addressing these questions are especially important given that few studies have interpreted polling data among high schools students within the context of developmental theory.

Additionally, civic engagement is more beneficial for youth when it targets issues that adolescents find meaningful and relevant to their own

lives by facilitating the development of civic skills, intrinsic motivation, and critical reflection (Jennings et al., 2006). Our findings suggest that youth may be especially concerned with reducing crime and violence. Thus, political initiatives that focus on reducing crime may be of particular interest to youth, and programs seeking to engage youth in the political process and enhance the benefits of such engagement may be more effective if they provide opportunities for adolescents to address these issues. Treating youth as an asset within the political system by providing them with opportunities to help shape public policy regarding crime and violence may ultimately increase adolescent civic engagement and improve the health and well-being of both youth and democracy (Ballard, Hoyt, & Pachucki, 2018).

Results also have important implications for community organizers. Our findings generally indicate that historical changes in youth's social concerns are meaningful yet happen gradually. Such consideration may prompt stakeholders and youth to adopt a broader and more long-term perspective on their approach to addressing social concerns. More generally, these findings also build on prior research that advocates for the inclusion of youth within the political process (Hart & Atkins, 2011), by demonstrating that adolescents also endorse a variety of social concerns that appear responsive to the political challenges of the time. Furthermore, community organizers should consider that many high school seniors are of voting age in the United States, yet polling data among this population is sparse. Documenting historical changes in high school students' social concerns may provide stakeholders with valuable knowledge regarding which issues are on the forefront of social change among younger voters.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Table S1. Simple slopes for demographic differences in historical trends for youths concerns about crime and violence and race relations.

Table S2. Simple slopes for demographic differences in historical trends for youths concerns about hunger and poverty and economic issues.